

# Consolidating containment: A visual exposé

Ronald P.M.H. Lay

## Abstract

Art therapists have their own art and art-making available to them as an important resource for personal and professional containment, reflection and perseverance. Engaging in and with their own art-making and images can lead to further insights, and can serve as a reservoir to deposit complex reactions, ruminations and responses to a global pandemic. This article surfaces one artist/art therapist's art-making through a visual exposé of his perspective on containment of circumstances that are essentially beyond his control. Art-making and self-reflection are championed as effective resources to sustain community even during periods of mandated isolation and distancing.

## Keywords

Art therapy, art, containment, global pandemic.

## Introduction: Contemplation during the circuit breaker

Contemplative silence, visuals, materials and media have been rich ingredients to my wellbeing, and perhaps homeostasis, since young. I loved picture books, as they served as the initial source of inspiration for my creative adventures and, indeed, my exploration and experiments with things. Entering formalised education was challenging; however, I embraced this socialisation endeavour given the invitation to create and make artwork as part of this process. Being invited to engage in art as part of early curricular requirements was developmentally appropriate and this made much more sense in my professional career as an artist, as an art psychotherapist and as an educator in higher education. My musings with art and art-making have seemingly matured since those earlier days of innocent mess-making masterpieces, to what I now often refer to as reflective and deliberate installations with leanings toward conceptual underpinnings.

At a time of restricted access to others, cleverly coined as a circuit breaker in Singapore during this global pandemic, I've found myself at my makeshift work-from-home office-cum-studio creating art. In tandem with this activity is the accompaniment of reflective processes that serve as the overarching impetus for the writing of this article. The aim here is

to share my perspective on how one's own art-making can lead to the containment of complex reactions to situations that are essentially beyond our control.

The construct of space, whether metaphorical, physical or intersubjective, adds additional layers here and can extend to include art materials and one's interaction with these. Sometimes words can be accessed, at other times this may be difficult and/or even impeded; indeed, a phenomenon that is and can be experienced within the relational and intersubjective space(s) of the therapeutic encounter (Bush, 2018; Havsteen-Franklin & Altamirano, 2015). Complementing this written perspective is a visual exposé featuring a series of four artworks. Figure 1 revisits a photograph that I took in 2015, while Figures 2 to 4 were purposefully created during the first phase of the circuit breaker in response to the compelling need to create something to address an unfavourable shift in my sleep patterns and daily routine.

A common belief in the discipline of art therapy is that the visual, including the art materials, has great capacity to hold complex material, and that the art and art-making do not necessarily need words to be expressed nor understood (Robbins & Goffia-Girasek, 1987). Bush (2018) asserts that "Different arts modalities can provide a means to bring into expression that which is less easily accessed or

known and help make sense of our resonant felt sensing, of our felt responses to intersubjective interactions with others and the things of the world” (p.128). The realities of the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) are that it has quickly and seriously impacted many aspects of our lives in an unprecedented manner and that art therapists have needed to re-evaluate how services and materials are provided (Potash et al., 2020). Compounding imposed restrictions are the uncertainties and unknowns surrounding this global pandemic.

The next section, Containment: Tapping into the reservoir of creativity, surfaces four artworks with dominant themes of containment, holding and intrigue, enshrined by circular form and objects that further reinforce the act and necessity for order. Some art therapists may be hesitant to share their artwork and narrative with others; however, I hold the belief that when carefully thought through, and when one considers the realistic parameters of self-disclosure, there are significant benefits to this practice (Havsteen-Franklin & Altamirano, 2015; Kaimal, 2015; Nash, 2020). Through a purposeful sharing of experience, including the sharing of one’s images and reflections, oftentimes there are aspects of the experience that somehow resonate with others (Kaimal, 2015). The intention here is to assert the power of our images and, in so doing, demonstrate our commitment to and faith in art, art-making and, of course, the discipline of art therapy (Fish, 2019; Jue, 2017; McNiff, 2019; Nash, 2020).

## Containment: Tapping into the reservoir of creativity

Since early 2020, Covid-19 has evolved into a global pandemic that has resulted in a significant shift in daily routines worldwide, restricted access to others and even quarantine for many. Everyone seemed to respond to the pandemic in their own way. I found myself, for example, deeply affected on all levels of my being as I felt inundated by 24-hour broadcasts and text messages about the ongoing developments and spread of the disease worldwide. This was further exacerbated over an extended period of time with no clear end in sight.

This naturally infiltrated both my personal and professional lives. As Programme Leader of a postgraduate art therapy training programme, in the midst of a critical semester, I felt responsible

for the integrity and continuance of the training while simultaneously ensuring the health, safety and wellbeing of the students and of the teaching staff. Having a strong, dedicated and committed teaching team anchored us in ways wherein we were able to develop the necessary contingency plans and way forward, and to navigate uncharted and tempestuous territory in ways that eventually saw the successful completion of the semester.

This level of intensity – of something that brought much of society to a standstill – was, for me, reminiscent of the incapacitating ice storm that hit Montreal and surrounding area during the winter of 1998. During precautionary stay-at-home measures at that time, I also turned to my art and, in community with my peers, created artwork in response to those frozen conditions – by candlelight, given the seemingly long-term power outages and uncertainties. Interestingly enough, I was in the middle of my own postgraduate art therapy training at that time. I witnessed then the power of engaging in my own artwork and was reassured that this same action would prove beneficial during this current and much more debilitating pandemic.



Figure 1. Ronald P.M.H. Lay, *Intriguing but not sure... definitely contained*, 2020, digital photograph.

Annually, the graduating MA Art Therapy cohort at LASALLE College of the Arts in Singapore create artwork alongside their research. Their artwork is exhibited as part of a group exhibition of the larger, annual, college-wide LASALLE Show. The cohort traditionally invite the teaching staff to compose a

written foreword for their exhibition catalogue and to include an artwork to complement the theme and text. The cohort came up with *The CuriOs Collective* for their exhibition title this year, explaining that it was "...an exhibition of artworks representing an inclusive harmony and strong individual identities" (LASALLE College of the Arts, 2020, p.7). Integrated within their exhibition logo is a series of words in Chinese, Sanskrit, Vietnamese, Zulu, Hebrew and Jawi. The graduating cohort state, "These collective meanings symbolize the ethos of the artists who have created these artworks in a nurturing and safe place, in parallel to their professional training and practice in art psychotherapy" (LASALLE College of the Arts, 2020, p.7).

After one student's remark that my laptop screensaver image reminded her of the coronavirus, I decided that perhaps that was the most appropriate image befitting their theme and everything that we had been through over the semester. Figure 1 is a digital photograph that I had taken in my neighbourhood in 2015. The shapes, the contrasts of colour and texture, and the way the objects were nestled within their frame were somehow comforting, and I was compelled to take a photograph. Making the link to the cohort's theme and to the pandemic I wrote, "Given the current circumstances instigated by Covid-19 over the past several months, I full-heartedly acknowledge and appreciate the courage, the compassion and the continuity of care necessitated at this time across a range of contexts, close to home and abroad," and then followed this proclamation with, "Postgraduate art psychotherapy training, in the best of times and in optimal conditions, is fraught with incredible challenges, exploration, discovery, transformation and of course, triumphs" (LASALLE College of the Arts, 2020, p.8).

The intention of using this image was to honour the graduating cohort's significant contribution to the discipline of art therapy within local contexts, and to celebrate the significant academic milestone of completing their training. In addition, this image serves to acknowledge that even though the final stage of their training was undeniably disrupted, they were able to admirably complete all aspects of their training through an unrelenting collective spirit. As their exhibition title, theme and logo suggest, the successful completion of their training was primarily achieved through deliberate containment,

collaboration and community. As the exhibition date drew nearer, it was decided that all aspects of the exhibition would be shifted online. There is much more here to reflect on, and I am confident that as time passes more images and metaphors will surface.

Throughout the semester I was rather impressed and in awe of how our students were managing and navigating the situation overall. Just as inspirational was the teaching team's sophisticated level of commitment, as evidenced by their constant support of the students and of their own expedited learning curve of online platforms and technologies. International best practices and ethics remained a priority through ongoing discussion and consultation, and through the sharing of professional resources and expertise (Potash et al., 2020). In addition to taking everything in their stride, and through the mentorship, guidance and supervision of the teaching team, students initiated online projects aimed at providing art and art-making to a range of populations and communities. Many of these online projects targeted underserved groups of people; some projects responded to the emerging mental health and wellness needs of the community; some provided a weekly online presence, encouraging others through images that the students created; and some of these online projects were extensions of the services that the students were providing through their clinical placements.

Where possible, the MA Art Therapy programme promoted student-initiated projects, including recognition on a range of online and social platforms, and students were encouraged to write about their projects and experiences. Figures 2 and 3 are examples of my own artwork, which I created as a participant in response to two of the student-initiated projects. Outbreak Art was a two-part project developed by Year 2 students Lee Rui Ping Marian and Sarvatmika Rajeev. They explained that "Part 1 was an open art studio session and Part 2 consisted of independent submissions. These two parts invited participants to contain, express and explore their emotions and thoughts on Covid-19 through creative means" (Lee and Rajeev, personal communication, 26 June 2020).

I readily accepted the invitation to contribute an artwork to Lee and Rajeev's project. At the time, I seemed glued to my makeshift office-at-home chair for days and so I took great pleasure in searching my

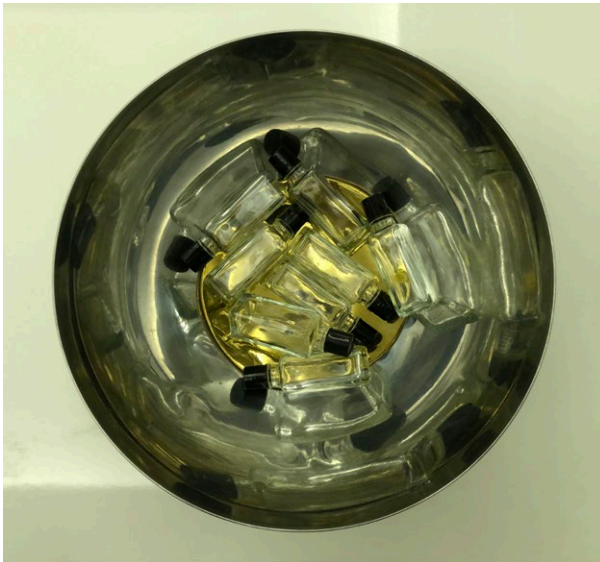


Figure 2. Ronald P.M.H. Lay, *Contemplative: Centering the chaos of Covid-19 in 2020*, 2020, mixed media, dimensions variable.

home for readymade objects that I could assemble and then photo-document (Figure 2). I was pleased with the outcome and found it interesting how the culmination of these objects being placed on my dining room table and photographed could also be read as a painting. The further I reflected on this image, the more I liked this effect: the interplay of what is and what may be, perceived through illusion and distortion. The blended and altered lighting, distorted from the overhead lights in my space, added hue and value to the way the other parts of the image came together. It was at the stage of the pandemic when I was coming to terms with mandated restrictions and how, at the same time, there were also emerging opportunities for new ways of working and perceiving the world.

Shortly thereafter, I heard about a project that one of my first-year students had initiated. Victoria Ng Swee Bee's online project, Art in Aid for the Mental Health of Migrant Workers – the #art4SGMW campaign, invites the community to create artwork and then have it uploaded online as a form of solidarity in response to Covid-19. "In the midst of tightening measures and isolation for migrant workers, many of them are experiencing isolation fatigue, a sense of helplessness, heightened fear and anxiety" (Ng, personal communication, 26 June 2020).

In art therapy as art therapist and in art therapy education as educator, it is imperative that one considers how one impacts and perhaps influences one's relationships and the therapeutic encounter, and

how privilege and difference are manifested. With this ever present in my mind, and in the context of where I currently reside and work, I was compelled to create an image and to contribute this to Victoria's project (Figure 3). Conscious of the need to remain sensitive here, my description remains surface-level. Nonetheless, I must state my gratitude to the migrant workers who have contributed much to this country



Figure 3. Ronald P.M.H. Lay, *Working mechanics of reflection(s)*, 2020, mixed media, dimensions variable.

and who have sacrificed a great deal to be here.

What I find most striking in my artwork here is the distortion in the bottom third of the image and how this has been illuminated, again by the overhead lighting. The longer I sit with this image, the more I cannot help but think of the importance and need for a solid foundation within a cityscape, and the amount of labour and attention that must go into this; oftentimes, the larger community takes this layer for granted. This pandemic has forced us to slow down, and through this particular project I further ponder the impact of industry, infrastructure and the inherent systems of society. This project is special for many reasons and I am proud of those art therapy students and art therapists that have been involved. After all, as the description of this project so eloquently proclaims:

*Times like this is when art can truly heal  
wounded souls and minds, allowing us to surpass  
the current challenges creatively and collectively.  
It is our sincere hope that with our expertise  
in art and art therapy, we could contribute to  
play an active role in healing our nation. May  
this campaign offer companionship and bring  
comfort and hope to our migrant workers during*

*this difficult period, especially when they are away from their family and loved ones.*

(Ng, personal communication, 26 June 2020)

This project has grown considerably and includes the collaboration of several local art therapists. An additional aspect of this project involves art kits that are assembled and provided to migrant workers, who in turn also engage by making art and posting this online as part of the larger community.

The final artwork in this visual exposé was created shortly after the second phase of the circuit breaker was implemented mid-way through June 2020 (Figure 4). This phase was characterised by the easing of some of the highly regimented and restrictive measures instituted during the initial phase; however, large-scale events, public gatherings and socialising with groups larger than five, for example, were still not allowed. Safety precautions such as regular hand washing, temperature taking, safe distancing, contact tracing, and the wearing of face masks while outside one's home remained mandatory. Working from home remained the norm, limited access to public facilities was ongoing, and dining in at food and beverage establishments was allowed but these experiences were far different from those pre-Covid. After months of mandated restrictions, isolation and distancing I was now experiencing hesitation to leave my home, my space, for extended periods of time. Having survived the months-long lockdown thus far, and learning to navigate new ways of being, primarily through online means, I was now quite cautious

about exposing myself to others and to the outside world. I returned to collecting objects and assembling them in a contained manner.

The central figure in this artwork was put through a process of soaking in tea and coffee over several months that resulted in layers of staining in and around the figure; this may speak to my need for comfort through the familiar. If you are wondering if I was consuming excessive amounts of these drinks, the answer is yes, and yes; this also played a role in the shift in sleeping patterns and daily routine as discussed in the first section of this article. Similar to the artworks in Figures 2 and 3, this artwork was placed on my dining room table and photo-documented, the table becoming a part of the image itself. Delving a bit deeper here, my intent in doing so was to suggest that I was placing my concerns, my ruminations, my thoughts, my artwork on the table to be highlighted, reflected upon and discussed. The inclusion of the other figures in the contained area, still in their manufactured sealant, is also suggestive of the inherent need for community, that I will be cautiously re-entering communal spaces, and that there are still many unknowns at this time in regard to the larger implications of the pandemic.

The repetitious use of the container, reflection and found objects within my home continues to stimulate my visual investigation into a range of thoughts, ideas and responses to my experiences. I am certain that an ongoing series will be developed and expanded upon over time. The four artworks used in this visual exposé are personal and have been purposefully used in public forums to not only contain and express myself creatively, but to also contribute to and celebrate the work of others.

## Conclusion: Community and beyond

Like many of my art therapy kindred, whether individually or in response to clinical work, I have instinctively turned to my art during this pandemic to simply engage and create (Fish, 2019; Potash et al., 2020). Sitting in contemplative silence, reflecting upon my artwork and processes, a myriad of complicated associations and insights (re)surfaces (Figure 1). I'm convinced that some of my internal dialogue is fused with lack of sleep, stress and imposed restriction on my and the world's larger freedoms (Figure 4). At the same time, sitting with my own images and reflections, and the literal

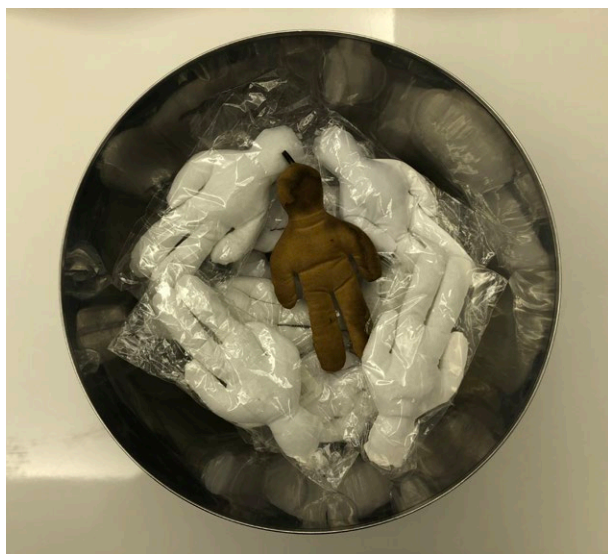


Figure 4. Ronald P.M.H. Lay, *The brunt of the circuit breaker*, 2020, mixed media, dimensions variable.

reflections contained within the materials I opted to use (Figures 2 to 4), I see that I am not alone, and that in spirit the triumph of humanity rises, and that community is and has been sustained all along.

On a personal note, creating artwork has affirmed the pleasures of creating and being absorbed in the extensive layers of the processes involved. Through reflexive frameworks, the flow involved tantalises my soul and rejuvenates me in ways that allow me to become further inspired, informed and recharged. Professionally, I am reminded of the profound impact art has on us and that there are dangers involved with the pathologising of art and art-making, including those within clinical encounters, and how art therapists should prioritise the art and art-making in art therapy (Fish, 2019; Havsteen-Franklin & Altamirano, 2015; Jue, 2017; McNiff, 2019).

Engaging in my own creative process during this time has contained a plethora of ruminations for me and has provided an effective self-expressive outlet. Although isolated, although distanced, a sense of the collective remains and is evidenced through the level of activity, sharing, camaraderie and collaboration that has been instigated, fostered and experienced primarily through online and social platforms. As the circuit breaker and restrictions in Singapore and around the world are reconsidered, recalibrated and perhaps lifted, much uncertainty remains; community, and indeed, humanity have persisted. As artists and art therapists we can remain confident that with and through our art and art-making we will move forward and beyond with dignity and perseverance.

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## Link to the LASALLE Show 2020:

<https://tls.lasalle.edu.sg/school/school-of-creative-industries#program-31>

## Art in Aid for the Mental Health of Migrant Workers – the #art4SGMW campaign:

Join us in this effort, by tagging your artwork with our campaign hashtag #art4SGMW on Instagram and emailing it to [art4SGMW@gmail.com](mailto:art4SGMW@gmail.com) to be posted on our Art4SGMW FB page and Instagram account.

## Link to Outbreak Art:

<https://www.canadianarttherapy.org/online-magazine/>

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